



SMALL WARS JOURNAL

The Pacific ?Pivot?: What it Means for Language, Region, and Culture Education and Training

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Editor's Note: While some of the language here is Air Force-centric, the discussion is nonetheless transferrable across the DoD and beyond.

The Obama administration has made the Pacific region -- Maritime Southeast Asia in particular -- the geopolitical focus of American foreign policy for the foreseeable future. There is good reason for this: in his 2010 book *Monsoon*, Robert Kaplan predicts the Indian Ocean, and most importantly the sea lanes that lead to it from the Pacific through the Straits of Malacca, will play *the* determining role in the United States' economic and security-related future.^[1] A 2012 Congressional report emphasizes that as the national economies of most Asian nations continue to grow and economic integration among countries in the region increases, the U.S. must place the highest priority on programs such as Building Partnerships (BP), using diplomatic, information, military and/or economic (DIME) tools as needed.^[2] What does this mean for the Air Force and the way it approaches Language, Region, and Culture (LRC) education and training? Over the next decade Airmen living and working throughout the Pacific region are likely to be increasingly called upon to interact with people from cultures representing worldviews that are very different than those we've grown accustomed to working with over the past decade in the context of the Global War on Terror (GWOt) in Iraq and Afghanistan, and our approach to LRC must adapt to these new realities.

The realities of conflict environments in Iraq and Afghanistan in the last decade necessitated "Just-in-Time" cultural training that focused heavily on the "Do's and Don'ts" of dealing with people living on the thin edge separating insurgency from cooperation. This training, by nature, tended to be reactive and largely dealt with on the ground tactical realities presented by intense interactions among warfighters and local populations. Many Airmen, whether in training and advisory roles, Provincial Reconstruction Teams, Force Protection, or Special Operations benefitted greatly from this education and training, but how much of that translates to the emerging BP mission in Asia? In this critical time of change from a wartime posture in the Middle East to a partnership building posture in the Pacific, it is important we strike the balance between retaining critical lessons learned from OIF and OEF, yet not get caught in the trap of letting our experiences in these conflict zones cloud our collective vision while forging ahead with our Asian counterparts.

The recent experience of most Asians is much different than that of Iraqis and Afghans. While Iraq and Afghanistan have both suffered decades of social and economic strife, the material and even political conditions of most Asian countries has drastically improved in the same period. We are engaging in these areas more out of long-term interest than immediate necessity, and how we've come to define what an

operational environment looks like will need to be modified in an Asian-centered BP context. LRC education and training needs to be adjusted in order to address three key components as we “Pivot” toward the Pacific realm: 1) BP in Asia is a 24/7 endeavor and the nature of the interactions among Airmen, partner air forces, and local populations are likely to be very different than what most Airmen have experienced in either Iraq or Afghanistan; 2) The cultures and worldviews of most of the people in Asia are much more unfamiliar to us than we realize; this means we have a steep learning curve when it comes to building Cross-Cultural Competence among Airmen who will live and work in partner Asian countries; and 3) We’ve got time to do it right. As is the case in Iraq and Afghanistan, relationship building in most Asian countries is *the* precondition of getting anything accomplished, but relationship building with Asian partners is very different than in the Middle East. Let’s briefly look at each of these components.

1) **BP in Asia is a 24/7 Endeavor:** In non-combat environments BP is a 24/7 endeavor that requires adaptive negotiation skills and Cross-Cultural Competence. In Iraq and Afghanistan, interactions with both our military partners and local populations were frequent, but often short and direct in nature. Yes, many, many council meetings, shuras, and training sessions went on for hours at a time and hardly seemed short at the moment, yet at the end of the day virtually all Airmen spent the majority of time sequestered from most locals (and even their coalition partners). When it comes to building relationships with our Asian allies, Airmen are likely to be working in highly permissive environments. Going back to a Forward Operating Base in a heavily armored (and armed) convoy after a meeting in Afghanistan is very different than working in Indonesia where an Airman is likely to take a bus driven by a local contracted driver to a hotel after a combined planning or operational exercise. This context requires an entirely different approach to cross-cultural relations. All personal interactions, whether working with military counterparts or asking for more towels at a downtown hotel could have broad strategic impacts diplomatically. Interacting with the local population on their own terms, unarmed and without extensive local knowledge shifts the power-equation in a serious way! This requires “deep” knowledge about a culture that goes far beyond the “do’s” and “don’ts” of Just-In-Time culture training, and will require all Airmen to think strategically while acting tactically when it comes to cross-cultural interactions. It will also require an operational approach that not only integrates LRC considerations into all aspects of mission planning and execution, but frames our interactions with military and civilian local nationals after the flying is done as a deliberate part of the mission.

2) **The cultures and worldviews of most of the people in Asia are much more unfamiliar to us than we realize.** The Pacific region is a staggeringly diverse place, with more than 3,000 distinct languages and numerous religions and philosophies practiced among almost 4 billion people (that’s more than half the world’s total population!). The geography of Asia is so diverse it is impossible to say that Asians even have a remotely shared experience with their environments. However, in spite of this diversity there are some broad generalizations that can be generally applied to most of the people in the area. One broad generalization is an emphasis on the community rather than the individual. Most Americans are familiar with the maxim “The squeaky wheel gets the grease.” It exemplifies the spirit of American entrepreneurship and our children are encouraged to “follow their dreams” and stand out from the crowd. The reality in much of Asia is very different. There is a Chinese saying mirrored in societies throughout the region that says “The loudest duck gets shot!” How does this saying contrast with a basic value that most Americans hold dear? What implications do the sentiments behind the Chinese saying have for our BP efforts?

Another significant difference among American and many Asian cultures has to do with worldviews. Most Americans tend to approach situations from an “either/or” point of view. Asian cultures tend to be more comfortable with “shades of gray”. Asian religions are an excellent illustration of this point. In the

West, one is considered either religious or not; Christian *or* Muslim *or* Jewish. It is generally unacceptable in the United States to declare adherence to more than one religious tradition. In Asia, the lines between religious and secular, and among faiths themselves are often blurred. For example, the Japanese have blended Shinto and Buddhist religious traditions for centuries, and today many even hold Christian-style weddings. In India it is common to see Hindus performing rituals adopted from Christianity and other faiths. In the worldviews of many cultures in Asia there is nothing contradictory about such practices. However, not all religions in Asia are this way, especially Islam. Many don't realize there are more Muslims in the Pacific region than in the Middle East, but it is important to remember that even though there are religious similarities between Middle Eastern and Asian Muslims, their historical, geographic, and social realities are much different from one another. The question Air Force leaders must address is how to take such attitudes into account when defining what mission success in various contexts might look like in an Asian BP context.

3) We've got time to get it right: So many journalists, academics, and politicians have referred to the 21st century as "The Pacific Century" it is not even necessary to trace the history of who said it first. It is common knowledge, and indisputable fact that the Asian region has become more economically powerful since the later part of the 20th century. Even with a few inevitable bumps in the road, this reality is not likely to change. This knowledge provides the Air Force with an opportunity to be proactive, rather than reactive in not only our operations, but also in our LRC education and training. Air Force involvement in the GWOt required a shift in most of our collective focus to the Middle East. An unfortunate side-effect has been the significant loss in our corporate memory and expertise of Asia and working with Asians. Obviously there has been continuity provided through exercises such as Cobra Gold in Thailand, the various COPE exercises throughout the area, and others, but in a region where personal relationships are so crucial in forging partnerships, we've got some significant catching up to do. The good news is, we've got time, and the Air Force should be deliberate in defining exactly what it wants out of its Asian partnerships and identify ways to re-institutionalize our collective knowledge of Asia's languages, geographic realities, and cultures. It should be consistent with American foreign policy and Department of Defense security posture statements, but it must also be "air-minded" in its approach.

In a fiscally constrained environment, forging strong relationships with our partners throughout the Pacific region is necessary if the United States is going to remain an influential player. Doing so requires the Air Force take a deliberate approach in building strong regional partnerships, and this necessitates the need for solid LRC education and training among all Airmen, regardless of rank or AFSC. The demands placed upon today's Airman call not only for technical superiority in any number of career fields, but also being able to effectively work with and live amongst partners representing a multitude of cultures, worldviews, religious backgrounds, and nationalities. As we shift our focus toward the "Pacific Century", it is vital we retain the valuable lessons learned from our long years spent in Iraq and Afghanistan, yet at the same time do not close our eyes to the challenges and opportunities presented by getting to know, live and work with our Asian partners and allies.

[1] Kaplan, Robert D., *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power* (New York: Random House Publishing, 2011).

[2] Congressional Research Service, *Pivot to the Pacific? The Obama Administration's "Rebalance" Toward Asia* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service 7-5700, 2012)

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